

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values inherent in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Civilization.*"

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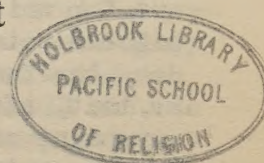
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Some Basic Implications in the Development of a Vital Rural Church Program

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All too often in our thinking we contrast principle with practice, philosophy with program, as if they were separate and distinct. As a matter of fact, the distinction between them is simply a classificatory device of the abstracting intellect. In life, philosophy, program, principle and practice are one. The Phillippian asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" He was looking for a program. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," they replied, answering him with a philosophy. In life what we believe is constantly shaping what we do and what we do is as constantly reacting upon belief. The man who thinks and the man who acts are one and the same man. Our church programs always reflect our philosophy and in their reaction upon people give that philosophy new meaning and power.

This paper begins with two assumptions which ought to be stated explicitly in the interest of clarity and a just appraisal. The first is that the statement of such a topic as "A Vital Rural Church Program" carries with it the implication that all too much of our rural church work is not vital at all. The second is that the local rural church is the center of focus of any vital rural church program. It is useless and indeed time-wasting to discuss conference, jurisdictional, national or interdenominational programs until we have determined what ought to happen in the local church. If this paper seems too much concerned with the local group at work in its community it is because I am convinced that once we are clear as to the work of the local group, then we can decide what auxiliary programs of encouragement and help can be inaugurated on district, conference, jurisdictional, and national levels. Too often those of us who guide programs on the more remote levels act as if under the impression that the local churches exist as proving grounds for our experiments. As a matter of fact, we exist and our experiments have meaning only in the light of the task of the local church.

Why is it that many of our local churches do not have a program of action which vitalizes, that is, brings a new quality of liveliness to their communities? We can scarcely hope to remedy the fault unless we can diagnose the disease. Some of the reasons seem to many of us to be reasonably clear. There is, first of all,

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the unconditional surrender of both laity and clergy throughout our denomination to the secular standard of bigness as the criterion of significance and importance. It is not that we say that big congregations, big buildings, big numbers, big budgets are important; it is that we all feel that this is true. The honest farmer says: "Our young preacher is certainly doing a fine work for us. We can't hope to keep him long for he will have a better opportunity, a larger field of service, offered him somewhere else." To say this is to focus the effort of the rural congregation on meeting standards alien both to rural life and to the Christian Gospel. If we want to keep our young pastor then, perforce, we must get bigger in numbers and plant and budget. But numbers and plant and budget are incidentals--means to the end for which the church exists. Thus, our acceptance of the secular standard of bigness puts us, as local rural churches, in a position of developing programs which deny the fundamental insights of the Gospel. It does not answer my point to remind me that, after all, rural churches do not, in the main, become large churches from any point of view. It is not their success or failure in meeting the standard of bigness but the possession of their minds and so their energy by bigness that is the root evil.

A second hindrance to a vital program in the local rural church lies in the location of our churches in such a fashion that they must fight against rather than work with the social forces of rural life. This takes place in two ways: Sometimes our church buildings are so located that congregations are drawn from several community areas; sometimes circuits are so arranged that, even though each separate church draws people from within the boundaries of the community only, a pastor is called upon to serve churches in two or more community areas. In the first case the pastor and officials must spend much time and energy simply in fighting the forces of trade and education and communication to keep a congregation together. Time and effort that ought to be spent in the enlargement of the fellowship and the Christianization of the community are spent in a grim struggle for survival. In the second case, the pastor must hop from community to community and so has no time to consider what he ought and might do to Christianize the social environment of his people. The church can scarcely bring life to people if it is struggling for its own life or if it is ministering to people in terms that abstract them from their community setting.

A third reason for a devitalized rural church program lies in our profound scepticism as to the applicability of the Christian Gospel in interchurch and intra-community relationships. We may be convinced that he who loses his life for Christ's sake and the Gospel, will find it, but we are not convinced that the statement has application to the lives of institutions and organizations. We may agree that we ought to love our enemies but we do not apply the command in our dealings with churches and community agencies. With them it is watchful waiting and an eye for an eye. That this attitude is understandable in the light of the standards of bigness which we have accepted does not make it defensible or Christian. If the Gospel can save men it can save churches, and communities. If it cannot save churches and communities then it cannot save men. Interdenominational rivalries, friction between church youth programs and those of high school or of Farm Bureau simply reveal the fact that we are not Christian. Unless we are willing to make the same adventure of faith in Christ institutionally which we are committed to make individually, we can not expect to have a vital rural church.

The program of the rural church is simply the philosophy of the rural church given a practical and effective expression. We have been discussing that philosophy and although I had not been privileged to read Brother Martin's paper¹

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- (1) "A Philosophy of Rural Church Work" by A. W. Martin, paper delivered at Methodist National Town and Country Church Conference, reported in Philosophy and Program of Town and Country Work, see footnote p. 1.

"The earth is the Lord's;" its products are the Lord's; my skill is the Lord's. These truths we must proclaim unceasingly. The commitment of man's will to God which has been the aim of the evangelistic message must now be shown to involve the stewardship of all our lives for God. A radical stewardship and self-discipline in the Wesleyan pattern of using only that of our wealth for ourselves which will support us simply we must preach and practice. The Christian spirit must permeate production and consumption as well as benevolence. Standards of production and standards of living must be made subordinate to standards of life.

Finally the local church must provide a window through which people may see the whole world. Not that we wish to lose the warm parochialism of the rural congregation in a sentimental cosmopolitanism. Rather we must let people whose technology makes them dependent on and beneficiaries of the whole world see that the world is their parish. Neighborly affection and concern must go out around the world and, to state, the most effective expression of a world mind has been the missionary enterprise of the Christian church. What friends the great empires have left now around the world are the friends won not by the missionaries of conquest or of commerce but by the missionaries of the Christ and of the Cross.

As I have suggested in my paper before the National Convocation on the Church in Town and Country¹ only a world spirit built on the Christian fellowship can motivate men to the sacrifices necessary to knowing the new world.

District, Annual Conference, Jurisdictional Conference, Board and Seminary programs must be drawn in the light of this program in the local church. I think that there are three points at which special help can be given to the local unit. The first is in the matter of building circuits and making appointments of pastors. Circuits should always be established within the limits of a single community and a pastor should never be asked (save perhaps in missionary territory) to cross community lines to serve a church. Wherever possible all Methodist religious life within a community should be under a unified direction, either that of a chief pastor and assistants, or, in so far as trained personnel is available, through group ministries. There should be no effort to close small neighborhood churches save as their members desire to close them, but their program should be correlated with the programs of other religious units within the community area.

When our circuits and other appointments are thus rearranged (here District Superintendents and Bishops might well receive expert research help from the Boards or the seminaries) then preference in rural appointments should be given to men with special training, and long-term appointments should be made with a system of upgrading within rural churches. No bishop ought ever to tempt a man specially trained for rural work to accept an urban appointment for the sake of a better support for his family. To do so is to waste education and commitment for the temporary expedient of satisfying a problem church in the city. The general acceptance of the brotherhood sharing principle of ministerial support will do away with salary differentials but there will still be the need of building over the years in each Conference several rural appointments which, in terms of responsibility and opportunity, rival any urban appointments the Conference has to give.

Second, there is need of a more careful and systematic supervision of rural charges. The District Superintendency in many cases has broken down at this point. In many Conferences our District Superintendents are chosen from large city churches with the result that they are out of touch with the need and psychology of our rural people. Their relationship to their rural churches is often nominal and legal rather

(1) "The Rural Church and International Cooperation," see Convocation Report to be issued by the Committee on Town and Country, Home Missions Council, 297 Fourth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Reformed, there was found only one item in connection with the work of the church on which all families without respect to religious affiliation agreed. All said that they wished to have their pastor called in case of sickness. This universal recognition of pastoral need in time of trouble offers an index to the opportunity available through calling to find and meet the real needs of our people.

A person-centered program necessarily means a group-minded program. We have already pointed out the centrality of the group in the development of personality. The work of the family, we have seen, is overlaid by the work of the school. But the school cannot do its wider work unless and until the family acts effectively. So, too, the effective work of the church depends upon strong family and school, which means that the family and school must find in the church and its pastor the strongest kind of understanding and support. Not that there will not be criticism of families and schools—the church which does not set standards fails to be a church. But such criticism will be motivated by a genuine interest in and concern for persons and not by institutional rivalries.

Two specially delimited groups demand our attention, the neighborhood and the community. The neighborhood is that little group of families living near one another and socially related by visiting, exchange of work, mutual aid in emergencies, and the like. Many of our open country churches are neighborhood churches and must be understood in the light of certain functions and needs of the neighborhood. The community is that area in which the majority of the families secure the majority of their services at a village center around which the whole area is psychologically polarized. The community is a developing and growing social reality. Its boundaries have been enlarging from the days when they were determined by the team haul to the present. Within a community trade has long presented a common front, education is increasingly doing so, and the church must, in my opinion, rapidly unify its services under a single administration within a community.

A third kind of group requires our attention in the interest of persons, the occupational organization. I use the words "occupational agency" because the church in rural areas has been, in my opinion, too much occupied with the farm organizations exclusively. The United Mine Workers forms one of the largest rural organizations in the United States today. Textile workers and their unions are dominant influences in many of our small towns. The Grange, Farm Bureau, Farmers' Union, and Southern Tenant Farmers' Union must not be forgotten. All of these agencies tend to take a narrow, particularistic point of view. It is our duty as a rural church to bring to them a universalizing of their horizons, to carry forward a ministry of reconciliation.

The vital rural church program will not only be person-centered and group-minded, but it will carry a message to persons regarding their material possessions. Here again the real Gospel message has been betrayed again and again by our institutional approach to wealth. Our question has been: "How can we raise the budget?" not "What must a Christian do with his wealth to be saved?" As a result we have saved budgets but lost persons. We have left the farmer with a pagan attitude toward the soil, the merchant with a pagan attitude toward his trade, the workman with a pagan attitude toward his skill. And these attitudes have lost us soil, trade, and skill so that we have gone hungry as a nation in the midst of natural abundance. One of the ironies of the war is that many of the scarcities of food products in our own country are due to the fact that for the first time in their lives millions of our fellow citizens and brothers are able to buy enough to eat.

in preparing my own I feel that the philosophy suggested by him finds a relevant application in what we say here. All of us are familiar with the ways in which personality develops. So dependent is personality for its development upon the groups in which we participate that extremists have been led to define it as "the subjective aspect of culture." "We are not born human; we become human in that most intimate of all groups--the family." There the biological organism is subjected to disciplines and satisfactions, becomes aware of the attitudes and expectations which persons in the intimate family world hold toward him, accepts these attitudes and expectations as defining what he is, and becomes a human being. In the family, the biological organism is socialized on the primary level of personality.

But personality so socialized or humanized is still essentially limited and immature. It requires to be referred to wider standards and expectations. So the child enters the school (and the whole organizational framework associated with school activities) and becomes aware of community expectations and attitudes. He is no longer mama's boy; he is one of the class, one of the gang, one of the team--a regular fellow. The reference shifts from family to community. Just as in the family we become human beings, so in the school we become community beings.

The insight of the great religions and of Christianity in particular is that this is not enough. Personality does not reach its maturity in family and school. It requires reference to wider and more comprehensive standards and loyalties. This wider reference is the business of the church. Just as we become human beings in the family and community beings in the school, so we become divine beings--sons of God--in the church. There the level of our socialization is raised from family or community limits and we recognize the universal aspects of our personalities. In the church we discover ourselves as members of a fellowship which is universal in space and in time. "The Church is the household of God, the body of which Christ is the head, the habitation of the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of those who believe and obey the Gospel."

If this is the method by which the church operates, then certain practical implications for the vital rural church program are clear. First, the program must be person-centered, that is, its focus of attention and interest must be the person. To say this is to deal in commonplaces unless we become specific. What I mean is that the pastor and the church must begin to center all attention upon the needs of persons--we could well forget the word member entirely. The church program is to be set not by the pastor on the basis of his own inclination or by virtue of dictate from ecclesiastical headquarters, but by the persons who are the church in terms of the needs of persons, their own and those of others in their community.

This is precisely what the ordinary rural church program does not involve. All too often the program is not person- but preacher-centered--calling for a minimum of participation on the part of the layman--offering him a spectatorship in religion. When the program requires little if anything in the way of action from those who are members of the church, it is little to be wondered at that it has no attraction for those beyond the church. The program of church action must be so planned and conducted that membership in the church will be as functional and meaningful as membership in a family.

This must begin with the pastor himself--he must indicate to his people that his concern is not with attendance or finance or budget as such, but with persons. He must be the one man in the community who has an incurable faith in persons--who believes in the recurring miracle of redemption. And his avenue for expressing that faith lies in the pastoral ministry. In a study made of church families,

than vital. Either we must alter our system of appointing superintendents to use men who have appropriate backgrounds and training or we must alter the superintendency as an office. Personally I feel that a more functional superintendency with a term unlimited except by the incumbent's efficiency would promote a more vital rural and urban church. (See West Wisconsin Conference plan.)

Third, there is a need for literature on all levels for use by the pastor and in the church. "The Town and Country Pulpit" edited by Dr. A. H. Rapking as a book of sermons for a year is a good beginning which should be quickly followed by another publication on program to avoid any implication that we are endorsing a spectator program of Christianity such as the average rural church has been carrying on. This literature should be produced--as the one edited by Dr. Rapking--by working pastors, and should be made available at a low price.

Some of you may be concerned because I have not talked program in terms of church school, evangelism, youth work, worship, budgets. I think that all these matters are important as means and that we must discuss them together. But I am equally certain that a preoccupation with means at this time will be absolutely fatal. What we must never lose sight of is persons. This world of ours is going through so rapid a series of social changes that the word "revolution" is not inappropriate in describing our times. Revolutions are not met and mastered for Christ by men who are totally concerned with the minutia of method for by the time we have mastered one method the situation which called it forth has changed entirely. John Wesley was a Methodist before he became a Christian and his Methodism unilluminated by Christian faith sent him home from Georgia in disgrace and despair. It was his personal discovery of God's personal answer to each person's need which fired his Methodism with vitality for his age. So our approach to a vital rural church program must come through a sense of persons and their needs in the light of God's answer in our day.